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# The Source Effect: Person Descriptions by Self versus Others Have Differential Effects on Impression Formation

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*Self-presentation via favorable self-descriptions may not lead to the desired impression, whereas positive descriptions by others may be more effective because they seem less susceptible to motivated bias. In four experiments, we investigated whether person descriptions have more impact on impressions when provided by third parties than by targets themselves. Results showed that target impressions were consistently more in line with the target description when positive sociability-related or positive competency-related information was given by a third party than by the target. This source effect always occurred for ratings of claimed traits. In addition, ratings of the target's sociability were also affected when the claim was about competency. Source effects were not obtained for negative self-descriptions. The results are discussed in terms of the presumed underlying process on the basis of mediation data.*

**Keywords:** *self-presentation; impression formation; source; third party; boasting*

Most people are concerned with the impression they make on others and, therefore, engage in a variety of strategies to manage this impression (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1980; Schneider, 1981), most notably by describing themselves in ways that promote the desired impression (e.g., Schlenker & Leary, 1982). The ubiquity of these self-descriptions renders them important sources of social data. However, person descriptions can also be provided by other people. People spend lots of time talking not only about themselves but also about others. Some authors claim that people devote up to 70% of their conversations to social talk,

like social anecdotes, gossip, or biographical narratives (e.g., Dunbar, Duncan, & Marriott, 1997; Emler, 1994).

In these studies, we address the question whether the impressions formed of a target person depend on who provides the information. We propose that, when it comes to positive claims, other people (i.e., third parties) are more influential in affecting impressions by providing person information than the target persons are themselves.

People are generally motivated to convey a favorable image of themselves to others (e.g., Jones, 1964; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Leary (1995) argued that individuals engage in numerous strategies to manage their public image, one of which is to strategically select the information they provide about themselves. Despite the fact that observers tend to take the world at face value (cf. truthfulness bias; e.g., Zuckerman, DePaulo, & Rosenthal, 1981; correspondence bias, e.g., Gilbert & Malone, 1995), they are aware that others' behaviors can result from impression management (Vonk, 1999). Thus, they may be suspicious and refrain from making correspondent inferences (Fein, 1996; Hilton, Fein, & Miller, 1993) when others make claims about their own

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virtues and abilities (cf. Reeder & Fulks, 1980). Because perceivers are aware that most people want to create a favorable impression, positive self-descriptions may easily be attributed to self-enhancing motives. Perceivers may, therefore, spontaneously correct for the implicitly assumed self-enhancement in positive self-descriptions, leading to less favorable impressions on the claimed traits.

Information relevant for person impression takes the form not only of self-descriptions but also of descriptions of others. It is quite common that people provide information to an audience about others (e.g., Pontari & Schlenker, 2004; Schlenker & Britt, 1999; Schlenker, Lifka, & Wowra, 2004). This type of person information may in general be less susceptible to bias. Whereas people are by default involved in managing their own impressions, they are not always motivated to strategically convey information about others to manage these others' public images. Therefore, when someone gives favorable information about another person, perceivers may consider the information as fairly accurate and unbiased. Hence, they may accept such information at face value and form an impression of the target that matches the description (cf. Jones & Davis, 1965). Of course, people may be motivated to create positive impressions of specific others (such as those of romantic partners and friends), which would justify vigilance on the part of the audience, but in the absence of such a relationship between source and target, descriptions of others will generally tend to be perceived as relatively unbiased. We predict, therefore, that descriptions by others lead to impressions that are more in agreement with the claim than are self-descriptions with the same content.

In this study, we test the general hypothesis that impressions of targets are more correspondent with a claim about positive characteristics (i.e., they match the information) when this claim is made by a third party than when it is made by targets themselves. To test this hypothesis, four experiments were conducted in which participants consistently read information about a target, either given by the target or by a third party, and subsequently rated the target.

Assuming that the predicted source effect is related to presumed self-enhancement motives of the target, we only expected to find a source effect for positive person information and not for negative person information because self-enhancement motives generally do not apply to situations in which people convey unfavorable information about themselves (cf. Jones & Davis, 1965). Therefore, it is unlikely that perceivers also correct their impressions of self-deprecating targets for strategic biases. For that reason, we first focus on person information that is favorable rather than unfavorable. In Study 3, we

come back to the differences between favorable and unfavorable information.

## SOCIABILITY AND COMPETENCY

The person information in these experiments was either sociability-related or competency related. Sociability and competency are regarded as two important dimensions in person perception (Reeder & Brewer, 1979; Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekananthan, 1968; Vonk, 1993) and self-presentation (see Jones & Pittman, 1982). Self-presentations can be aimed at conveying an image of being likable and sociable (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Jones & Wortman, 1973). People generally prefer to come across as likable because this promotes their chances of gaining friendship, social support, companionship, and romance. Self-presentations can also be focused on being regarded as competent or knowledgeable—qualities that are associated with higher status, better jobs, and more power over others (Leary, 1995). Although the goals related to these two self-presentational tactics might be different, we expected a source effect on both dimensions. On either dimension, targets who make claims about their qualities may evoke suspicion about self-presentational motives (i.e., they may be seen as boasting) or flattered self-views, causing perceivers to refrain from taking the claim at face value, whereas descriptions by third parties may seem more accurate, resulting in impressions that correspond more strongly with the claimed qualities.

In the first study, the person information concerned a claim of high sociability. The main dependent variable was the extent to which impressions of the target are correspondent with the person information. We use the term *correspondent* to indicate that a rating of a target person matches the information provided about this person. We expected source effects on trait ratings that are relevant to the dimension of the person information. So, in this case, ratings of sociability are assumed to be affected by sociability-related information. We also measured ratings of the target's competency but we did not expect a source effect on this nonclaimed trait.

## STUDY 1

### Method

#### *Participants and Design*

Forty-two students (14 males) at Radboud University Nijmegen participated in this study in exchange for course credits or 1 Euro (approximately \$1.50). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two source conditions (self vs. third party).

### Procedure and Materials

Participants were told that they were participating in an experiment about personal advertisements and person perception. They learned that the researchers were interested in how people form impressions of others and that they would, therefore, read part of a personal advertisement and answer a few questions. In both conditions (self or third party), the personal advertisement consisted of the same person information. The target either described himself or herself or was described by a friend. The target was described as a very sociable senior student who was looking for a romantic relationship. The gender of the target was not specified. The complete stimulus materials in the self condition are presented below. Wording in the third-party condition is between brackets.

I am [M is] 23 years old and almost graduated. Currently, I am [M is] still living in a student's house downtown. I like [M likes] music, movies, traveling, books, and many things more. I play [M plays] sports twice a week but also love [loves] good food. I am [M is] very spontaneous and quick at relating to people in a nice way. The mood lightens up right away when I enter [M enters] a place, and people always become cheerful because of me and my [M and M's] contagious laughter. In a relationship, I mainly seek [M mainly seeks] respect and equality.

After participants read the person information self-paced from a computer screen, they rated the target on five trait items (overall impression, likable, kind, competent, and annoying). Participants used 7-point Likert-type scales for their ratings (1 = *not at all likable*, 7 = *very likable*). The sociability scale was calculated from the items overall impression, likable, kind, and annoying (recoded),  $\alpha = .87$ .

### Results

To test whether ratings on the relevant trait dimension (i.e., the target's sociability) were more correspondent with the information in the third-party condition than in the self condition, we performed an ANOVA with source of information as the between-subjects factor and the sociability ratings of the target as the dependent variable. In line with our hypothesis, the target was rated as more sociable in the third-party condition ( $M = 5.58$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ) than in the self condition ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ),  $F(1, 40) = 14.46$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .27$ .

An ANOVA with source of information as the between-subjects factor and the competency ratings of the target as the dependent variable unexpectedly revealed that the

target was also rated as more competent in the third-party condition ( $M = 5.00$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) than in the self condition ( $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ),  $F(1, 40) = 6.10$ ,  $p < .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .13$ . Because the sociability and competency ratings were correlated,  $r(42) = .62$ ,  $p < .001$ , the source effect on competency ratings might be fully mediated by sociability ratings, which appeared to be the case: When we regressed source on competency ratings after controlling for sociability ratings, the effect of source ( $\beta = 0.36$ ,  $t = 2.47$ ,  $p < .05$ ) dropped to nonsignificance ( $\beta = 0.06$ ,  $t < 1$ ), whereas the effect of sociability ratings was significant ( $\beta = 0.59$ ,  $t = 4.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A Sobel test confirmed the mediation ( $Z = 2.78$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This means that the target was rated as less sociable when describing himself or herself favorably in the personal advertisement, which led to lower ratings of competency. There was no direct effect of source on competency ratings.

### Discussion

As hypothesized, the target was rated as more sociable when described as sociable by a third party than it was when described by himself or herself. A possible explanation for this finding is that perceivers corrected for a strategic bias in the self-description. Alternatively, the positive self-presenter may not have been perceived as very socially skilled and likable, because he or she violated the modesty norm. Interpersonal norms concerning how people should present themselves posit that people should not be too boastful about themselves (e.g., Cialdini, Wosinska, Dabul, Whetstone-Dion, & Heszen, 1998; Leary, 1995). Because these two mechanisms would both affect the same variable in this study, namely the sociability ratings, they cannot be teased apart in these data. This is remedied in Study 2, where we used competency-related information. Thus, in Study 2, correction for self-serving bias should result in lower competency ratings of the self-enhancing target, and reduced liking caused by immodest behavior should result in lower sociability ratings.

Unexpectedly, we found a source effect on competency ratings. There are two possible explanations. First, as the relationship between sociability and competency ratings suggest, the source effect on competency can be due to a halo effect (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Thorndike, 1920): Information about someone on a specific domain (e.g., sociability) can be informative for other domains as well (e.g., competency). In line with this notion, a mediation analysis showed that this direct effect of source disappeared when we controlled for sociability ratings. That is, the target was seen as less sociable when he or she described himself or herself favorably in the advertisement, which caused the lower competency ratings.



Alternatively, the effect on competency ratings may be related to specific properties of the stimulus material used in this experiment. The stimulus material not only contained information about the target's sociability but also that the target was almost graduated from college and liked books. Participants may have regarded this as competency-related information, which may have resulted in the same source effect that produced the higher sociability ratings in the third-party condition (i.e., assumed self-promotion versus the third party's lack of motivated bias). Further studies should reveal whether the effect on the competency ratings is a general finding due to a halo effect or whether it has been inadvertently caused by our stimulus material. We return to this issue later.

Study 2 was similar to Study 1, but we investigated source effects concerning competency-related person information.

## STUDY 2

### Method

#### *Participants and Design*

Thirty-nine students (16 males) at Radboud University Nijmegen participated in this study in exchange for course credits or 1 Euro. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two source conditions (self vs. third party).

#### *Procedure and Materials*

Study 2 was similar to Study 1 except that the stimulus materials referred to a different situation and contained different person information. Participants read that the experiment was about a job application procedure. In the self condition, participants ostensibly read part of a job application letter, whereas participants in the third-party condition ostensibly read part of a letter of recommendation from the target's current employer. In the self condition, the target described himself or herself using statements like "I am sensible, intelligent, and a hard worker." In the third-party condition, the target's current employer described the target using the same statements ("Karen<sup>1</sup> is sensible, intelligent, and a hard worker"). After participants read the person information self-paced from a computer screen, they rated the target on the same traits as in Study 1. The sociability scale was calculated from the items overall impression, likable, kind, and annoying (recoded),  $\alpha = .87$ .

### Results

As hypothesized, an ANOVA with source of information as the between-subjects factor and the competency

ratings as the dependent variable, revealed that the target was rated as more competent in the third-party condition ( $M = 5.65$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) than in the self condition ( $M = 4.80$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ),  $F(1, 37) = 4.62$ ,  $p < .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .11$ . A subsequent ANOVA on the sociability ratings showed that this nonclaimed trait was also affected by source of information. As expected, the target was rated as more sociable in the third-party condition ( $M = 5.14$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ) than in the self condition ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ),  $F(1, 37) = 28.08$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .43$ .

Like in the previous study, there was a significant correlation between sociability and competency ratings ( $r = .46$ ,  $p < .01$ ). However, this time there was no mediation of the nonclaimed trait ratings by the claimed trait ratings, which we did find in Study 1; that is, competency ratings did not mediate the source effect on sociability ratings in Study 2. When we regressed source on sociability ratings after controlling for competency ratings, the effect of source ( $\beta = 0.66$ ,  $t = 5.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ) remained significant ( $\beta = 0.57$ ,  $t = 4.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Although the effect of competency ratings was also significant ( $\beta = 0.27$ ,  $t = 2.19$ ,  $p < .05$ ), a Sobel test showed that mediation was nonsignificant ( $Z = 1.54$ ,  $p = .12$ ). Apparently, the source effect on sociability ratings was not due to a spillover effect from the claimed trait (i.e., competency).

Study 1 showed that the lower sociability ratings of the boasting target were responsible for the lower competency ratings. To investigate whether the same process occurred in Study 2, we tested whether, also in this competency information paradigm, the source effect on competency ratings was mediated by the sociability ratings just like it was in the sociability information paradigm of Study 1. A mediation analysis showed that this was indeed the case: The effect of source on competency ( $\beta = 0.33$ ,  $t = 2.15$ ,  $p < .05$ ) disappeared after controlling for sociability ( $\beta = 0.05$ ,  $t < 1$ , *ns*), while the effect of sociability was significant ( $\beta = 0.43$ ,  $t = 2.19$ ,  $p < .05$ ). A Sobel test confirmed the mediation ( $Z = 2.02$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

### Discussion

Study 2 showed that target persons were rated more favorably on competency when a third party described them as highly competent than when they described themselves as highly competent. As in Study 1, not only the claimed dimension was affected by the source but also the nonclaimed dimension—that is, the targets' sociability. A plausible explanation for this finding is that targets providing positive self-descriptions were rated as relatively unsociable and/or were liked less because they violated a modesty norm (cf. Cialdini

et al., 1998; Leary, 1995), which negatively affected impressions of these targets in the sociability domain. The targets' immodest self-presentation on the competency dimension reduced not only their perceived sociability but also their perceived competency. The mediation analysis shows full mediation of the effect on the competency rating by the sociability rating, which suggests that the decreased competency rating in the self-presentation condition was entirely due to the decreased sociability rating.

In this case, the source effect on the nonclaimed trait cannot be explained as a straightforward halo effect because the effect on sociability was not mediated by competency ratings. In retrospect, it seems likely that the source effect on the nonclaimed trait obtained in Study 1 was probably inadvertently caused by the stimulus materials rather than by a halo effect. To get a better insight in this matter, the design of Study 3 enables us to make a more direct comparison between source effects in the sociability and competency domain.

### STUDY 3

One goal of Study 3 was to replicate the source effects found in the first two studies for both sociability- and competency-related information. Therefore, participants in this study received a person description that pertained to one of the two dimensions. Moreover, Studies 1 and 2 used scenarios that differed from each other not only in the dimension of the person information but also in their context. Study 1 used a personal advertisement, whereas Study 2 used a job application procedure. To allow a direct comparison between the two person information dimensions, we investigated them in the same context in Study 3: Participants in all conditions read information about a young person who had worked at a camping site.

In the previous section, we argued that the effects on the nonclaimed traits in Studies 1 and 2 may be caused by different mechanisms. The source effect on competency ratings in Study 1 was probably caused by the stimulus materials that also contained competency-related information about the target, whereas the source effect on sociability ratings in Study 2 probably resulted from more negative perceptions of the self-enhancing target's social skills and a reduced liking of the target. To definitely rule out the possibility that both effects on these nonclaimed traits were caused by a general halo effect, we now used stimulus materials that only contained information about the focal dimension. Effects on the nonclaimed dimension are, therefore, expected to occur only in the competency information condition because boasting on any dimension should lead to lower

sociability ratings but only to lower competency ratings when the target's self-promotion directly pertains to the competency dimension. However, if in this study sociability information still affects the ratings of competency, this must be due to a halo effect because this specific sociability-related information is as such not diagnostic about the target's competency.

In Study 3, we also wanted to address another important question. In the first two studies, we only investigated the effect of positive person information on impressions, leaving the question unanswered how negative person information that is either presented by the self or a third party affects the perception of target persons. Therefore, in Study 3 we varied valence of the person information and hypothesized that negative information would result in correspondent negative impressions regardless of the source because negative behavior is seen as informative independent of context (Jones & Davis, 1965). Reeder and Spores (1983) and Vonk and Van Knippenberg (1994) demonstrated that individuals are evaluated negatively when engaging in negative behavior regardless of situational causes. Similarly, we assume that negative statements about a person are seen as informative regardless of the source because people generally do not have self-presentational motives to make negative self-claims,<sup>2</sup> and third parties generally do not have ulterior motives for providing negative descriptions of other people. Thus, we expect to replicate the source effect for positive information and expect that negative information elicits equally unfavorable impressions irrespective of source.

In this experiment, participants in all conditions read information about a young person who had recently worked at a camping site. Participants read either positive or negative information about this target. The person information was characterized by the target's successes or failures, which were related to either sociability or competency.

### Method

#### *Participants and Design*

One hundred and three students (22 males) at Radboud University Nijmegen participated in exchange for 1 Euro or course credits. Participants were randomly assigned to a 2 (source: self vs. third party)  $\times$  2 (valence of information: positive vs. negative)  $\times$  2 (dimension of person information: sociability vs. competency) between-participants design.

#### *Procedure and Materials*

As in the previous studies, participants read a scenario containing person information presented on a

computer screen. The scenario described how the target, camping site employee M, had experienced the last camping season. The target's gender was not specified. The text described the target either positively or negatively, and the information pertained to the target's sociability or competency. The self and third-party conditions were identical except that the information in the third-party conditions was ostensibly given by a colleague of the target. For example, in the condition self/positive/sociability, the text contained the statement "I have the talent to empathize with others and make them feel at ease. Also, I have a good sense of humor, which resulted in pleasant interactions between me and many colleagues." In the condition in which the colleague described the target with the same information (**other**/positive/sociability), participants read, "M has the talent to empathize with others and make them feel at ease. Also, M has a good sense of humor, which resulted in pleasant interactions between M and many colleagues." In the condition self/**negative**/sociability, the information read, "I do not have the talent to empathize with others, and can be rather rude. Also, I basically lack any sense of humor, and I hardly had pleasant interactions with colleagues."

In the condition self/positive/**competency**, it read, "I worked hard all season, and besides that, I just know how to tackle these managerial things. I happen to have the talent to organize things tightly and handle several tasks at the same time." The condition self/**negative**/competency, went, "I really worked hard all season, but I just don't see how to tackle these managerial things. I probably do not have the talent to organize things tightly and handle several tasks at the same time." The third-party descriptions were similar in content yet written from the perspective of the colleague.

After reading the person information, participants rated the sociability and competency of the target on 12 explicit items using 7-point Likert-type scales. Sociability-related items were overall impression, likable, ability to function in groups, sociable, kind, and annoying (recoded). To increase the validity of the competency measure compared to the single-item measure used in Studies 1 and 2, we used 5 competency-related items in Study 3. Participants indicated how competent and precise they judged the target to be, the extent to which they judged the target to be a good employee, the probability that they would hire the target again if they were the employer, and what hourly wage they found reasonable for the target (open-ended question). The sociability scale was computed from the six sociability-related items ( $\alpha = .92$ ). The competency scale was computed from the five competency-related-items ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

## Results

Preliminary analyses revealed a main effect of valence on sociability and competency ratings,  $F(2, 100) = 49.87, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .50$ . Impressions were more negative after negative information than after positive information. This effect held for both the sociability ratings (positive information:  $M = 4.53, SD = 0.97$ ; negative information:  $M = 3.58, SD = 1.11$ ),  $F(1, 102) = 21.67, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .18$ , and the competency ratings (positive information:  $M = 5.56, SD = 1.12$ ; negative information:  $M = 3.81, SD = 1.02$ ),  $F(1, 102) = 67.94, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .40$ . This indicates that in general perceivers strongly base their judgments on the valence of the information at hand.

We predicted source effects in the positive information condition but not in the negative information condition. Furthermore, effects on the nonclaimed dimension were expected to occur only in the competency information condition and not in the sociability condition. This means that source effects are expected to be a function of valence, dimension condition, and rating dimension. In line with these predictions, an ANOVA with valence, source, and dimension condition as between-subjects factors and rating dimension as a within-subjects factor revealed a significant four-way interaction,  $F(1, 95) = 4.04, p < .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .04$ . This means that source and dimension condition had different effects depending on whether the information was positive or negative and whether the rating was about sociability or competency. To further study this higher order interaction, we analyze the effects for positive and negative information conditions separately and for sociability and competency ratings separately.

### *Negative Information Conditions*

We first examined whether a source effect occurs for negative person information.

*Sociability ratings.* As expected, an ANOVA on the negative information conditions with source (third party vs. self) and dimension of information (sociability vs. competency) as between-subjects factors and the sociability ratings as dependent variable showed no main effect of source across dimension conditions,  $F(1, 49) < 1, ns$ , nor was there an interaction between source and dimension,  $F(1, 49) < 1, ns$ . There was a main effect of dimension of information,  $F(1, 49) = 107.35, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .70$ . Perceivers rated the target as less sociable when they received negative sociability-related information ( $M = 2.51, SD = 0.51$ ) than when they received negative competency-related information ( $M = 4.36, SD = 0.69$ ) but, as the nonsignificant interaction indicates,



**TABLE 1:** Means and Standard Deviations of Ratings of the Target as a Function of Source and Dimension of Information in Conditions With Positive Person Information in Study 3

	<i>Sociability-Related Information</i>				<i>Competency-Related Information</i>			
	<i>Self</i>		<i>Third Party</i>		<i>Self</i>		<i>Third Party</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Sociability	4.79 <sub>a</sub>	0.52	5.42 <sub>b</sub>	0.52	3.54 <sub>a</sub>	0.98	4.69 <sub>b</sub>	0.60
Competency	4.84 <sub>a</sub>	0.68	4.41 <sub>a</sub>	0.93	5.78 <sub>a</sub>	0.70	6.63 <sub>b</sub>	0.61

NOTE: For each rating, across rows and within dimension conditions, means that share subscripts are not significantly different from each other at  $p < .05$ .

source did not moderate these ratings. Thus, as expected, there was no source effect on sociability ratings for negative information.

**Competency ratings.** The same pattern emerged when we analyzed the competency ratings of the target in the negative information conditions. There was no main effect of source across dimension conditions,  $F(1, 49) < 1$ , *ns*, nor was there an interaction between source and dimension,  $F(1, 49) < 1$ , *ns*. Again, there was a main effect of dimension of information: The target was rated as less competent when the negative person information was about competency ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) than about sociability ( $M = 4.36$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ),  $F(1, 49) = 12.28$ ,  $p = .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .21$ . Thus, both for competency and sociability ratings, perceivers base their judgments of targets on negative person descriptions, irrespective of the source.

#### *Positive Information Conditions*

Means and standard deviations concerning the sociability and competency ratings in the positive information conditions are presented in Table 1.

**Sociability ratings.** Here we found the predicted source effect: Across sociability and competency information conditions, the target was rated as less sociable when the source was the target ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) than when the source was the third party ( $M = 4.99$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ),  $F(1, 52) = 20.51$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .30$ . The interaction between source and dimension of information was nonsignificant,  $F(1, 52) = 1.66$ ,  $p = .20$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ . In agreement with this, source affected sociability ratings in both the sociability information condition,  $F(1, 21) = 8.14$ ,  $p = .01$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .29$ , and the competency information condition,  $F(1, 30) = 15.56$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .35$ . There was also a main effect of dimension: Across source conditions, the target was rated as more sociable in the sociability information condition ( $M = 5.11$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ) than in the competency

information condition ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ),  $F(1, 52) = 25.40$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .34$ . So, in line with Studies 1 and 2, sociability ratings were higher after a third-party description than after a self-description, regardless of whether the description was about sociability or competency.

**Competency ratings.** As expected, we did not find a main effect of source on competency ratings,  $F(1, 52) = 1.10$ ,  $p = .30$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .02$ . Across dimension conditions, the target's competency was not rated higher in the third-party condition ( $M = 5.73$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) than in the self condition ( $M = 5.38$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ). We did, however, find the expected interaction between source and dimension,  $F(1, 52) = 9.98$ ,  $p < .01$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .17$ . As predicted, the target was rated as more competent after a description about competency provided by a third party ( $M = 6.63$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ) than one provided by the target ( $M = 5.78$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ),  $F(1, 30) = 13.00$ ,  $p = .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .31$ , but after a sociability-related description the target's perceived competency was the same irrespective of whether the description was given by the third party ( $M = 4.41$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) or by the target ( $M = 4.84$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ),  $F(1, 30) = 1.51$ ,  $p = .23$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .07$ .

As in Study 2, the source effect on competency ratings was mediated by the sociability ratings. The effect of source on competency ratings ( $\beta = 0.56$ ,  $t = 3.61$ ,  $p = .001$ ) disappeared when we controlled for sociability ratings ( $\beta = 0.28$ ,  $t = 1.62$ ,  $p = .12$ ), whereas the effect of sociability ratings was significant ( $\beta = 0.47$ ,  $t = 2.68$ ,  $p = .01$ ). A Sobel test confirmed the mediation ( $Z = 2.22$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Besides the expected interaction between source and dimension on competency ratings, we also found a main effect of dimension. Competency ratings were higher after a competency-related claim ( $M = 6.22$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ) than after a sociability-related claim ( $M = 4.62$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ),  $F(1, 52) = 61.18$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .56$ . Because we found the same effect for sociability ratings,

this means that, effects of source left aside, person descriptions have a stronger impact on ratings directly relevant to the dimension of the information than on ratings less relevant to the information.

## Discussion

One of the goals of Study 3 was to investigate whether a source effect also occurs for negative information. The results clearly show that, as we predicted, there was no effect of source for negative descriptions. Perceivers strongly based their impression of the target on the valence of the information—so negative person descriptions led to fairly negative impressions—but these impressions were not influenced by the source of the negative information. Apparently, perceivers seem to attach equal value to the information irrespective of whether people themselves reveal negative personal information or someone else does so.

When it comes to positive information, all our hypotheses were confirmed, too. Firstly, we replicated the source effect on target impressions on the claimed traits. Second, we found that, as predicted, the self-enhancing targets were only rated as less competent when they claimed to be highly competent, not when they claimed to be highly sociable. This was an important finding because quite unexpectedly we did find an effect on competency after a sociability-related claim in Study 1. The fact that we did not find an effect on competency in Study 3, suggests that there is no general halo effect that affects perceived competency of ingratiating targets. Rather, as suggested earlier, the effect on competency after a sociability claim in Study 1 seems to have been caused by the inadvertent contamination of the sociability information in this study with some competency-related information.

Like in the previous study, the source effect on competency ratings after a competency-description was mediated by the sociability ratings. This suggests that there is a consistent explanation for the fact that the person who boasted about his or her competency was evaluated as less competent. Perceivers think that the boaster is not very socially skilled or likable, which attenuates the extent to which they accept the competency claim.

Sociability judgments, on the other hand, were lower after all positive self-descriptions, not just after positive self-descriptions concerning sociability—a finding consistent with Studies 1 and 2. This suggests that people who openly boast about themselves are seen as unsociable, regardless of the dimension they boast about. Apparently boasting is seen as inappropriate behavior

(cf. Cialdini et al., 1998; Leary, 1995) that harms the extent to which perceivers regard the braggart as sociable or likable.

However, two questions remain unanswered. The first is, What explains the source effect on sociability ratings? The second question is, Are there other potentially mediating factors for source effects on competency ratings than just sociability ratings? We address these two questions in Study 4.

## STUDY 4

The main goal of this study was to investigate the process underlying the source effect. Therefore, we replicated the positive information conditions from Study 3 (with some adaptations, see Method) and investigated two possible mediating constructs. The first potential mediator was the extent to which perceivers rated the target as boastful. People who boast about their qualities violate norms of modesty and are, therefore, evaluated less favorably. This might directly affect sociability ratings because boasting is regarded as unsociable behavior. Competency ratings might be affected because, in line with the previous studies, perceivers have an overall negative impression of the boasting target, which also attenuates impressions of other traits than sociability-related traits. Thus, we again investigate if ratings of the target's sociability affect ratings of the target's competency.

The second possible mediator is the extent to which perceivers judge the source (i.e., self or third party) to be strategic. People who seem to be strategically conveying information about themselves to manage their public image might be judged as less sociable or likable because social norms prescribe that people behave authentically and not pretend to be better than they are (cf. Leary, 1995).

There was one more issue that we wanted to deal with in Study 4. Considering that lower sociability ratings mediate the effect of competency information on competency ratings, then why do lower sociability ratings of the self-enhancing target not affect the competency ratings of the target in the sociability condition? Is there something specific about the sociability perceptions of the target who claimed high competency? Is this target perhaps seen as extraordinarily socially unskilled or as extraordinarily unlikable? To investigate this question, we measured several variables related to the perceived social skills and likability of the target and looked at the unique contribution of these two components of sociability in explaining the source effect on competency ratings following claims of high competency.

**TABLE 2:** Means and Standard Deviations of Ratings of the Target as a Function of Source and Dimension of Information in Study 4

	<i>Sociability-Related Information</i>				<i>Competency-Related Information</i>			
	<i>Self</i>		<i>Third Party</i>		<i>Self</i>		<i>Third Party</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Sociability	5.24 <sub>a</sub>	0.86	5.99 <sub>b</sub>	0.54	3.84 <sub>a</sub>	0.89	4.79 <sub>b</sub>	0.94
Competency	4.64 <sub>a</sub>	0.88	4.71 <sub>a</sub>	0.80	5.47 <sub>a</sub>	0.54	6.04 <sub>b</sub>	0.41
likability	5.16 <sub>a</sub>	0.91	5.90 <sub>b</sub>	0.57	3.81 <sub>a</sub>	0.80	4.98 <sub>b</sub>	0.88
Social skills	5.38 <sub>a</sub>	0.90	6.13 <sub>b</sub>	0.59	3.90 <sub>a</sub>	1.14	4.45 <sub>a</sub>	1.18

NOTE: For each rating, across rows and within dimension conditions, means that share subscripts are not significantly different from each other at  $p < .05$ .

## Method

### *Participants and Design*

One hundred students (16 males) at Radboud University Nijmegen participated in exchange for 1 Euro or course credits. Participants were randomly assigned to a 2 (source: self vs. third party)  $\times$  2 (dimension of person information: sociability vs. competency) between-participants design.

### *Procedure and Materials*

The method of this study was identical to that of Study 3 but with three differences. Firstly, we only ran conditions with positive person information and skipped the negative information conditions (because in these conditions, there was no source effect in Study 3). Second, within the same camping-site context, we adapted the scenarios to create cleaner manipulations of sociability and competency. In the sociability conditions, we minimized confounding with competency by eliminating references to the targets' capacity to socialize with customers of the camping site because this would also have implications for the quality of the targets' work and therefore for their competency. The manipulation of competency was also cleaner in the sense that it no longer referred to effort, which it did in the previous study. Scenarios in all conditions were somewhat shorter than in Study 3 and more to the point.

The final difference with Study 3 was that we measured several additional dependent variables to enable a detailed process analysis. We also added extra items to measure the dependent variables (sociability and competency) even more reliably. From the total of 24 items we calculated three highly reliable aggregate scales and one single-item variable based on a factor analysis (OBLIMIN rotation) and reliability analyses. One scale was a potential mediator, namely the extent to which the target was rated as boastful, computed from the items modest (recoded), annoying, arrogant, self-satisfied, haughty, and boastful ( $\alpha = .91$ ). We treated the extent to

which the source was rated as strategic as a single item variable.

The two dependent variables were again overall sociability and overall competency ratings. The sociability scale was computed from the eight items overall impression, sociable, kind, friendly, ability to function in groups, nice, socially skilled, and easygoing ( $\alpha = .94$ ). We also calculated the sociability subscales social skills (from the items sociable, ability to function in groups, and socially skilled,  $\alpha = .84$ ) and likability (from the items overall impression, kind, friendly, nice, and easygoing ( $\alpha = .89$ ). The competency scale was computed from the nine items competency, precise, intelligent, businesslike, orderly, talent to organize, immune to stress, responsible, and persistent ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

## Results

All pertinent means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2.

### *Sociability Ratings*

The results concerning sociability ratings replicated those of Study 3: Across sociability and competency information conditions, the target was rated as less sociable when the source was the target ( $M = 4.52$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) than when the source was the third party ( $M = 5.39$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ),  $F(1, 99) = 26.12$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .21$ . The interaction between source and dimension of information was nonsignificant,  $F(1, 99) < 1$ ,  $ns$ , entailing a significant main effect of source in both the sociability condition,  $F(1, 48) = 13.18$ ,  $p = .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .21$ , and the competency condition,  $F(1, 50) = 13.49$ ,  $p = .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .22$ .

*Mediation.* To analyze which processes underlie the fact that the targets were rated as less sociable when they gave a favorable self-description, we performed two separate analyses for the two dimension conditions because we considered that the underlying processes

might be different in the sociability condition and the competency condition. In both analyses, the dependent variable was the perceived sociability of the target, and the potential mediators were (a) the extent to which the target was rated as boastful<sup>3</sup> and (b) the extent to which the source (i.e., the target or the third party) was rated as strategic. The potential mediators were not correlated,  $r(100) = .11$ ,  $p = .25$ .

The first multiple mediation analysis showed that the source effect on sociability of the target in the sociability information condition was indeed mediated by this model: The effects of boastfulness of the target and strategic motivation of the source were both significant (respectively  $\beta = -0.36$ ,  $t = -3.50$ ,  $p < .01$ , and  $\beta = 0.24$ ,  $t = 2.96$ ,  $p = .01$ ).<sup>4</sup> The initial effect of source on sociability ( $\beta = 0.47$ ,  $t = 3.67$ ,  $p = .001$ ) remained marginally significant ( $\beta = 0.27$ ,  $t = 1.86$ ,  $p = .07$ ). Sobel tests confirmed that mediation by boastfulness of the target was significant ( $Z = 2.97$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and that mediation by strategic motivation of the source was marginally significant ( $Z = 1.93$ ,  $p = .06$ ).

The second multiple mediation analysis showed that the source effect on the sociability ratings in the competency information condition was fully mediated by the combination of the two mediators: The originally significant effect of source ( $\beta = 0.47$ ,  $t = 3.67$ ,  $p = .001$ ) disappeared after simultaneously controlling for boastfulness and strategic motivation ( $\beta = 0.27$ ,  $t = 1.24$ ,  $p = .22$ ). However, although the predictors together fully explained the differences in sociability ratings caused by source in these conditions, none of them individually explained the effect ( $ts < 1.03$ ,  $ps > .31$ ). Sobel tests confirmed that mediation was nonsignificant for each individual mediator ( $Z = 1.02$ ,  $p = .31$  for boastfulness of the target;  $Z = 0.64$ ,  $p = .52$  for strategic motivation of the source). This is probably due to high correlations between the predictors within these conditions, which precludes single predictors from uniquely explaining the effect. Boastfulness of the target was significantly affected by source ( $\beta = -1.62$ ,  $t = -9.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but strategic motivation of the target was not ( $\beta = -0.41$ ,  $t = 1.50$ ,  $p = .14$ ). Because the first criterion for mediation is thereby not met for ascribed strategic motivation of the source, this variable does not seem to contribute to explaining the source effect here. It may, therefore, be concluded that boastfulness of the target fully mediated the effect of source on sociability of competency-related information.

### Competency Ratings

Across sociability and competency information conditions, the target was rated as more competent when the source was a third party ( $M = 5.37$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ) than

when the source was the target ( $M = 5.07$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ),  $F(1, 99) = 5.35$ ,  $p < .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .05$ . However, further analyses show that this main effect is driven by the competency condition: The interaction between source and dimension of information was marginally significant,  $F(1, 99) = 3.41$ ,  $p = .07$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ , and the source effect in the sociability condition was nonsignificant,  $F(1, 48) < 1$ ,  $ns$ . The effect of source was significant in the competency condition,  $F(1, 50) = 17.77$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .27$ : The source was rated as more competent in the third-party condition than in the self condition. So, completely in line with the results of Study 3, the competency ratings are only affected by source in the competency information condition and not in the sociability information condition.

*Mediation.* In the competency condition, ratings of boasting of the target and strategic motivation of the source did not mediate the source effect on competency ratings. The original effect of source on competency ratings ( $\beta = 0.52$ ,  $t = 4.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ) remained significant ( $\beta = 0.42$ ,  $t = 2.00$ ,  $p = .05$ ), and the mediators were nonsignificant ( $ts < 1$ ,  $ns$ ).

Like in the previous studies, the sociability ratings may be fully responsible for the source effect of competency-related information on the competency ratings. To investigate this possibility, we conducted a multiple mediation analysis on the source effect on competency ratings, this time with the two subscales of sociability (i.e., social skills and likability) as predictors. The subscales were correlated,  $r(100) = .86$ ,  $p < .001$ . The mediation analysis showed that the source effect on competency ratings was fully explained by likability ratings of the target. The source effect on competency ratings ( $\beta = 0.52$ ,  $t = 4.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ) disappeared ( $\beta = 0.28$ ,  $t = 1.47$ ,  $p = .15$ ), whereas the effect of likability was significant ( $\beta = 0.35$ ,  $t = 2.29$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The effect of perceived social skills was not significant ( $\beta = -0.10$ ,  $t < 1$ ,  $ns$ ). Sobel tests confirmed that mediation was significant for likability of the target ( $Z = 2.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ) but not for social skills ( $Z = 0.72$ ,  $p = .47$ ).

*The role of likability in the source effect.* This latter mediation analysis shows that within the competency information condition the likability component of sociability is responsible for the source effect on competency ratings. Why does the source effect in the sociability information condition not also spread to the competency ratings via a similar likability-mediated process? This seeming discrepancy may be ascribed to the fact that high competency claims reduce the self-presenter's likability to a much greater extent than high sociability claims. Contrast analyses showed that the perceived likability of the target who claimed high competency stood out



from the other likability ratings: The mean likability rating in the condition where the target claimed high competency ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) was lower than the likability of the target who was described by a third party as competent ( $M = 4.98$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ),  $t(96) = 5.24$ ,  $p < .001$ , lower than the likability of the target who claimed high sociability ( $M = 5.16$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ),  $t(96) = 5.96$ ,  $p < .001$ , and lower than the likability of the target who was described by a third party as sociable ( $M = 5.90$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ),  $t(96) = 9.30$ ,  $p < .001$ . This suggests that only the likability rating of the target who claimed high competency may have been low enough to affect the competency ratings.

## Discussion

The results of Study 4 replicated the results of the previous studies: Positive person descriptions given by a third party led to more favorable impressions than did the same descriptions given by the targets themselves. Like in Study 3, we found that perceivers evaluated targets as less sociable when they boasted—regardless of whether they boasted about sociability or competency. This implies that perceivers judge explicit positive statements of individuals about their own qualities as unsuitable social behavior. This was supported by the finding that ratings of the target as boastful and the source as strategically motivated mediated the source effect on sociability ratings.

The process underlying the source effect seemed to differ depending on the dimension of the person information, though. Within the sociability information condition, perceivers judged bragging targets as relatively boastful and strategic, which negatively affected their sociability ratings. The targets were rated as less socially skilled and less likable. Thus, one explanation for the source effect is that making positive statements about one's own sociability creates perceptions of conceit and strategic motivation, which harms impressions of the self-presenter's sociability.

However, the effects on competency following competency claims were not directly explained by perceptions of boastfulness and strategic motivation. In retrospect, this seems sensible: People who are confident in what they want to achieve can sometimes be very straightforward in describing themselves, which may create perceptions of conceit and strategic motivation, but this blunt directness may as such be quite compatible with high competency. What did explain the low competency ratings of targets who claimed high competency was the fact that they were rated as exceptionally unlikable by perceivers. These low likability perceptions explained the fact that targets who claimed high competency were seen as less competent

than those described as competent by a third party. It seems that perceivers judged that people who are that unlikable cannot be very competent. This appears to be the most plausible explanation for the finding that (in line with Study 3) the competency ratings of the target were only affected by source when the claim was about competency and not when it was about sociability. Apparently, lower sociability ratings emerge as soon as someone gives a favorable self-description but lower competency ratings occur only under specific circumstances—that is, when the favorable self-claim is about competency, and perceivers strongly dislike the self-promoter for making this high competency claim.

Perceptions of social skills appeared not to play a role in the source effect on competency ratings and were not even affected by source in the competency conditions. Apparently, blatant self-promotion about competency is not necessarily seen as something that is mainly done by people who lack social skills but rather as something unpleasant.

In short, these data suggest the following process. Claiming high qualities leads to perceptions of being boastful and strategic, which in turn leads to lower perceptions of sociability, regardless of whether the claimed qualities lie in the domain of sociability or competency. Claiming high competency leads to remarkable dislike on the part of perceivers. As a consequence, perceivers' impressions of the target's competency are lower compared to competency impressions of a person who is described as competent by someone else.

As expected, the lower sociability ratings of targets who boasted about their sociability were only partially explained by the combined mediation of boastfulness of the target and strategic motivation of the source. The effect of source on sociability ratings remained marginally significant after controlling for the effects of boastfulness of the target and strategic motivation of the source. This supports our assumption that low sociability ratings after a sociability-related self-claim reflect two processes: (a) reduced perceptions of sociability and likability because the boasting target violates social norms and (b) a lighter weighing of the self-provided information as a consequence of perceiver's correction for motivated bias.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

In four experiments, we showed that positive self-claims are suboptimal for impression management. Person information provided by third parties seems more effective because the resulting target impressions better matched the claimed qualities than when the



targets themselves made positive claims. This finding is in line with the common assumption that the truly talented can let their qualities speak for themselves (Jones, 1990; cf. Kruger & Dunning, 1999).

Moreover, we have established (a) that the source effect only occurs for positive and not for negative information; (b) that the booster is evaluated more negatively on sociability compared to the same information coming from a third party, no matter whether the claims are about high sociability or high competency; and (c) that the lower ascribed competency after a competency-related boast is due to lower sociability ratings. Additionally, not only were the self-presenters less effective in creating the desired impression, they were also perceived as less sociable, less likable, and more strategic and boastful. Straightforward self-presentations apparently are not appreciated in social traffic. This converges with the notion put forward by Jones and Pittman (1982) that self-promoters run the risk of appearing arrogant. The negative inferences concerning boastfulness and strategic motivation even appeared to be partly responsible for the lower sociability ratings of the target who claimed high sociability. Individuals who claimed high competency were also regarded as boastful and strategic, but this did not directly affect their competency ratings. Rather, it harmed judgments about their sociability, which in turn led to lower competency perceptions of targets who boasted about their competency. More specifically, it was the likability component of sociability that explained why perceivers evaluated targets who claimed to be competent as less competent than those who were described as competent by others. Apparently, perceivers assumed that people who are unlikely enough to make such high-competency claims cannot be very competent. Perceivers also evaluated targets who claimed high sociability as relatively unlikely, but this dislike was much weaker and therefore not powerful enough to affect evaluations of the targets' competency. This explains why competency ratings are affected by reduced liking of the self-enhancing target in the competency conditions but not in the sociability conditions.

The source effect appears to occur only when the person descriptions are positive. Negative information is not weighed more heavily when it is provided by a third person. As expected, we found that people disregard positive self-presented information to some extent because it seems to be aimed at coming across as highly competent or socially skilled, which of course cannot explain claims of low competency or sociability.

These findings add several important notions to the impression-formation literature. First, these findings suggest that perceivers correct their impressions for undue positivity of favorable self-claims, resulting in suboptimal

impressions of the target, which is theoretically new (but see Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Moreover, self-promotion appears to be a hazardous enterprise because people who engage in it are seen as more dislikable and arrogant—two rather negative inferences. This research may teach savvy self-presenters to avoid being regarded as arrogant and unsociable by having someone else sing their praises.

To our knowledge, this is the first time that it is shown that perceivers' impressions of people who are being described by others are highly contingent upon these descriptions. Research on beneficial impression management previously showed how and when people support others by strategically providing information about them (e.g., Pontari & Schlenker, 2004, 2006; Schlenker & Britt, 1999). Our findings extend this research by demonstrating the effectiveness of this strategy for the actual impressions that perceivers form of the targets.

## NOTES

1. To investigate whether the gender of the target influenced social judgments of the target, in Study 2 about half of the participants were told that the target was male, whereas the other half was told the target was female. No effects of this factor were found.

2. People sometimes have a motive to convey an unflattering image of themselves and, therefore, strategically stress or simulate negative characteristics (for a review, see Vonk, 2001). For example, people sometimes feign incompetence to make opponents lower their guard (i.e., sandbagging; Shepperd & Socherman, 1997) or claim low ability to create lower standards for future evaluations (Baumgardner & Brownlee, 1987). However, none of these motives were implied by the experimental setting used in this study.

3. One could argue that it is odd to ask perceivers to rate the boastfulness of the target based on a third-party description. However, the difference between perceived boastfulness of the self-describing target and the target who was described by the third party can be interpreted as the deviation from some form of a baseline of boastfulness because perceivers have no relevant information to base their boastfulness rating of the target on in the third-party conditions.

4. This analysis shows that the relationship between strategic motivation of the source and sociability ratings is positive when boastfulness is partialled out. This indicates that the remaining component of strategic motivation after controlling for boastfulness reflects a form of social competence. When one removes selfishness- and bias-related components from strategic motives, what presumably remains is something like being attentive to the various factors in a social setting.

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